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Apostolic Synod of Jerusalem as the Model and Inspiration of Synodality

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Abstract

The origin and development of synods and councils in the Church can be traced back to apostolic practice as described in the Acts of the Apostles. The leadership of the early Christian communities in Jerusalem was initially entrusted to the twelve apostles, who were assisted by presbyters and elders. These leaders participated in decision-making assemblies that could be called "synodal assemblies" in the broadest sense. The application of the principle of synodality is seen in the election of Matthias, the election of seven deacons, and the synod of Jerusalem. The synod of Jerusalem is considered by many to be the authentic model of synodality and decision-making in the Church. The Acts of the Apostles provide a common biblical heritage for all Christianity, with synods serving as a means of resolving disputes and maintaining unity in the Church.

Keywords

Apostolic, Synod, Synodality, Jerusalem, Acts of the Apostles, Synod of Jerusalem, Assembly, Synodal Decision, Peter's Discourse, Romans

The origin and development of synods and councils can be traced back to apostolic praxis as described in the *Acts of the Apostles*. According to the testimony of the *Acts*, the leadership of the primitive communities of Jerusalem was initially entrusted to the twelve apostles, led by Peter, who were assisted by presbyters and elders. Also the presbyters and elders partic-

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ipated in the responsibilities of the apostles, although in a subordinate way. They also participated in the decision-making assemblies, which could be called “synodal assemblies” in the broadest sense, not in the technical sense ascribed to them today.¹

Many see the application of the principle of synodality, especially in connection with the election of Matthias (*Acts* 1:15-26), the election of seven deacons (*Acts* 6:1-6) and the synod of Jerusalem (*Acts* 15), since these decisions were made “in agreement with the whole Church” or jointly.² Matthias was elected in the community of all. Peter, as the head of the community of “believers”, took the initiative to select “one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection” (*Acts* 1: 21-22).³ After Peter’s proposal, the Christian community presented two persons, Joseph and Matthias, who were worthy of the office and apostleship. Then they prayed and chose Matthias by lot, who was added to the eleven apostles (*Acts* 1: 23-26).

Similarly, the twelve apostles called together “the whole community of the disciples” to select the seven deacons (*Acts* 6: 2). The community of disciples selected from among them “seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom” (cf. *Acts* 6: 3), whom they presented to the apostles. The apostles prayed and then laid hands on them, and so they became the first deacons (*Acts* 6: 6). The first ministers were thus elected by the “community of disciples” and then “consecrated” by the apostles.

Following this introduction to synodality in the *Acts of the Apostles*, the synod of Jerusalem (*Acts* 15: 1-41) is discussed in detail because it well expresses the nature and characteristics of a synod or council and is considered by many to be the authentic model of synodality and decision-making

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1. Cf. D. Faltin, “L’institution synodale dans le concile Vatican II”, in *Kanon* 2 (1974) 39-40.
 2. Cf. P. Trembelas, *Dogmatique de l’Eglise orthodoxe*, vol. 2, Burges 1967, 398-399; P. Duprey, “The Synodical Structure of the Church in Eastern Theology”, in *One in Christ* 7 (1971) 152-153; D. Salachas, “Il principio della struttura sinodale delle Chiese orientali nella legislazione canonica antica”, in *Nicolaus* 2 (1978) 227-228; J. Forget, “Conciles”, *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*, Tome III, Paris 1908, 637.
 3. All the scriptural citations in this article are taken from the *Holy Bible*, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), Bangalore 2007.

in the Church.⁴ Obviously, the word synod or council did not exist at that time.

Conversion of Gentiles and the Question of Circumcision as the Context of the Synod of Jerusalem

In the beginning, Christianity appeared as a ramification of the “Jewish religion”, because Jesus Christ, the Blessed Virgin Mary, St Joseph, the twelve apostles, other disciples and followers of Christ belonged to the Jewish religion. Even the feast of Pentecost, during which the Holy Spirit descended on the apostles and disciples, was a “Jewish Pentecost”. The participants of Pentecost were “devout Jews from every nation” (*Acts* 2: 5) or “both Jews and proselytes” (*Acts* 2: 10), namely Jews by birth and those who had converted to Judaism.

Regarding the relationship between the Church and Judaism, the Second Vatican Council, citing the Apostle Paul, affirms: “The Church keeps ever in mind the words of the Apostle about his kinsmen: “theirs is the sonship and the glory and the covenants and the law and the worship and the promises; theirs are the fathers and from them is the Christ according to the flesh” (*Rom.* 9: 4-5), the Son of the Virgin Mary. She also recalls that the Apostles, the Church’s main-stay and pillars, as well as most of the early disciples who proclaimed Christ’s Gospel to the world, sprang from the Jewish people”.⁵

The admission of the Gentiles to Christianity was the result of a gradual process guided by the Holy Spirit and a growing awareness of God’s universal will for salvation. It was Peter himself, the head of the apostles, who first opened the gates of Christianity to the Gentiles. As described in the *Acts of the Apostles* (chapter 10), Cornelius of Caesarea, a gentile centurion of the Italian cohort, sent messengers to Peter in Joppa at the behest of the angel of the Lord, who came to the house of Cornelius, where his relatives and close friends were also gathered. While the apostle Peter was still speaking of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit fell on Cornelius and on

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4. I do not deal with the historicity of the assembly of Jerusalem, which is generally considered to have been held around the year 51 AD.
 5. Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate* (Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions), no. 4.

all who heard the Word, who were all Gentiles. When Peter saw this, he said, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have? So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ" (*Acts* 10: 47-48).

This event is often referred to as the "Gentile Pentecost" because just as the Holy Spirit came upon the Jews on the day of Pentecost, represented by the disciples and the other 120 people in Jerusalem, He also came upon the Gentiles, represented by the house of Cornelius. In this case, the Holy Spirit descended on Cornelius and his family even before they were baptized in water, and in fact the descent of the Holy Spirit served as a guarantee of their baptism. The baptism in the Holy Spirit was performed by God to convince Peter to administer water baptism.⁶ In fact, it was the very pre-baptismal gift of the Holy Spirit that would serve as the basis for their subsequent and immediate baptism.⁷ According to Luke's account, Peter administered baptism to the Gentiles for the first time and thus received them into the Church even without consulting the other apostles, for he acted under the sole impulse of the Holy Spirit; the real agent in this event was the Holy Spirit, who took the entire initiative, and Peter was only an instrument.⁸

Despite the Cornelius episode, Peter is generally considered an apostle to the Jews, while Paul is regarded an apostle to the Gentiles, universalizing the Church, converting Gentiles from various nations. In fact, through the missionary activity of Paul and Barnabas⁹, many Gentiles came to believe in Jesus Christ, and thus a Christian community originated in Antioch (*Acts* 11: 19-24; 13: 13-52; 14: 21-28). Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch after their first missionary journey and the evangelization of many peoples

6. Cf. E. Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries*, Cambridge 2009, 175-178.

7. Cf. Y. Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, vol. II ('He Is Lord and Giver of Life'), New York 2001, 193; M. E. Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation* (revised and expanded edition), Collegeville 2007, 32.

8. Cf. J. M. R. Tillard, *Church of Churches: The Ecclesiology of Communion*, Minnesota 1992, 198; Y. Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, vol. II, 193.

9. Barnabas was one of the very first followers of Jesus and a leader of the early Church. His original name was Joseph, but those who knew him well gave him the new name Barnabas, which means 'son of encouragement'. For information about him, see *Acts* 4: 36-37; 11: 25-26; 14: 1 and 15: 36-40.

in Asia Minor. When they arrived there, they called the Church together and reported what God had done with them and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles (*Acts* 14: 27). At this point, a problem emerged in Antioch, which Luke describes as follows:

Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved". And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders (*Acts* 15: 1-2).

Those who provoked the controversy were "certain individuals came down from Judea". They were targeting those who had been converted to Christianity from Gentiles. About these troublemakers, Paul writes to the Galatians that at first there were no problems with the conversion of Gentiles, but later the situation changed: "But because of false believers secretly brought in, who slipped in to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might enslave us—we did not submit to them even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might always remain with you" (*Gal.* 2: 4-5). In any case, the advocates of Judaism claimed that "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved". In their view, circumcision and observance of the Mosaic law were necessary for salvation and therefore should be imposed on all who would embrace the Christian faith. It should be noted that the admission of Gentiles to Christianity is not the point of contention, but only the conditions for their admission.¹⁰

Paul and Barnabas, who opened the borders of Christianity to the Gentiles in Antioch and other neighbouring places without requiring them to be circumcised, defended their position. So there was much controversy and debate over the issue, and finally Paul and Barnabas and some other

10. Cf. G. Leonardi, "È ancora attuale il concilio di Gerusalemme? (At 15, 1-35)", in *Credere oggi* 76 (1993) 22; cf. R. Fabris, *Atti degli Apostoli*, Brescia 1979, 96; G. Schneider, *Commento teologico del nuovo testamento, gli atti degli apostoli, parte seconda*, Brescia 1986, 235; F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, Michigan 1986, 303; *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 9, 195-197.

delegates were commissioned by the Church to go to Jerusalem “to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders”.

The Assembly of the Whole Community and the Opposition of Some

The delegation from Antioch, led by Paul and Barnabas, soon reached Jerusalem and was warmly welcomed by the entire Christian community. Luke describes the event as follows:

When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, “It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses” (*Acts* 15: 4-5).

Three kinds of people are mentioned in the text: “the church” (the entire community of believers), “the apostles” and “the elders”. At the meeting held before the synod to hear Paul and Barnabas, they were all present.¹¹ Therefore, this can be considered a preliminary meeting of the entire people of God for consultation and discussion.

Paul and Barnabas “reported all that God had done with them” to the assembly, namely the conversion of many Gentiles, their baptism and reception into the Church. However, the whole community did not receive this message with joy. “Some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees”, perhaps the emissaries of those who were causing trouble in Antioch, or others who held the same position in the Jerusalem Church, rose up and said, “It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses”. In fact, this group held that keeping the law of Moses was absolutely necessary for salvation, and therefore Gentiles who wished to embrace the Christian faith should first be circumcised, and they should be required to keep the law of Moses. All believers participated in these preliminary discussions, together with the apostles and elders.

11. Cf. J. D. Zizioulas, “The Development of Conciliar Structures to the Time of First Ecumenical Council”, in *Councils and Ecumenical Movement*, WCC Studies 5, Geneva 1968, 36.

The Synodal Assembly of the Apostles and Elders

After the assembly of all Christian believers and joint deliberations, “the apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter” (*Acts* 15: 6). Although the entire Christian community was present at the meeting that preceded the synod to hear Paul and Barnabas, the synod itself was attended only by the apostles and elders, who are authentic witnesses of the Gospel and primarily responsible for the Church. Paul and Barnabas, of course, participated in the synod.¹² After the problem had been discussed at length, Peter stood up and expressed his authoritative opinion.

Discourse of Peter

As head of the apostles, Peter was the first to speak in the synod. Because of the vision from heaven in Joppa (*Acts* 10:9-16) and having personally seen the work of the Holy Spirit on the Gentiles in the Cornelius episode, Peter already had a clear and certain idea of the salvation of the Gentiles and their reception into the Church, even before the problem of circumcision arose.

Based on his own experience in Joppa at the baptism of Cornelius and his household, Peter categorically affirmed at the synod that the Gentiles had heard the word of God and had received the Holy Spirit just as the other disciples had, and that God Himself had thus proved that circumcision and the Mosaic law were not necessary for salvation. The book of *Acts* reports the discourse of Peter as follows:

My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will (*Acts* 15: 7-11).

Peter's argument was very sound and convincing because it was based on the testimony of God Himself, who made no distinction between Jews and

12. Cf. J. D. Zizioulas, “The Development of Conciliar Structures”, 36.

Gentiles in bestowing the Holy Spirit, as is evident from the incident of Cornelius and his household. Peter concluded that all, whether Jews or Gentiles, are equally “saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus” (*Acts* 15: 11) and therefore, of course, circumcision and observance of Mosaic law are not necessary for salvation.¹³

Testimony of Paul and Barnabas

The synod of Jerusalem did not end with Peter’s speech, but the discussions and debates continued. The whole assembly was silent and listened to Paul and Barnabas, who told them about “all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles” (*Acts* 15: 12). The missionary experiences of Paul and Barnabas confirmed and substantiated Peter’s position that the Mosaic Law was not applicable to gentile converts. The two defended their position not theoretically but only indirectly by describing facts, namely the miracles that God Himself had done through them among the Gentiles, thus confirming that their position was in accordance with God’s plan of salvation.¹⁴

Later in the *Letter to the Galatians* Paul proudly recalls the synod of Jerusalem and the approval of the other apostles for his mission among the Gentiles: “[...] I had been entrusted with the gospel for the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel for the circumcised (for he who worked through Peter making him an apostle to the circumcised also worked through me in sending me to the Gentiles), and when James and Cephas and John, who were acknowledged pillars, recognized the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised” (*Gal.* 2: 7-9). In this passage, John is also explicitly mentioned; it is sure that all the apostles present in Jerusalem participated in the synod, even if their names are not explicitly mentioned in the *Acts of the Apostles*.

13. Cf. G. Schneider, *Commento teologico del nuovo testamento*, 237-238; F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 306-307; *The Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 9, 198-201.

14. Cf. G. Leonardi, “È ancora attuale il concilio di Gerusalemme?”, 26; G. Schneider, *Commento teologico del nuovo testamento*, 238-239.

Declaration of James (Acts 15: 13-21)

In agreement with Peter, Paul and Barnabas, James, who led the Church in Jerusalem, also accepted the fundamental principle that circumcision and the Mosaic law should not be imposed on Gentiles who wished to accept the Christian faith. He corroborated this position citing Prophet Amos 9, 11-12, in which the prophet reveals God's will for universal salvation and foresees conversion "from all other peoples" and "all the Gentiles". "His speech shows a vision of the Church's mission that is firmly grounded in God's plan, but at the same time is open to Him making Himself present in the gradual unfolding of the history of salvation".¹⁵ For the peaceful coexistence of Jewish and gentile Christians, James suggested that the latter should abstain: a) only from things defiled by idols, b) from fornication, c) from whatever has been strangled and finally, d) from blood.¹⁶ The synod accepted the four "necessary things" proposed by James as it is evident from the following synodal letter.

Final Decision and Synodal Letter (Acts 15: 23-29)

After much discussion and debate on various aspects of the issue, the "apostles and elders" came to a final decision on the matter based on a common consensus. Moreover, "with the consent of the whole church" they choose two leading "men from among their members", Judas and Silas,¹⁷

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15. International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, Vatican City 2018, no. 20. Pope Paul VI established the International Theological Commission in conjunction with the Congregation (Dicastery) for the Doctrine of the Faith on 11 April 1969. The task of the Commission is to assist the Holy See, and especially the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, in the examination of doctrinal questions of great importance.
 16. For details and interpretation, cf. G. Leonardi, "É ancora attuale il concilio di Gerusalemme?", 26-30; R. Fabris, *Atti degli Apostoli*, 97; G. Schneider, *Commento teologico del nuovo testamento*, 239-243; F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 309-312; *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 9, 202-203.
 17. Silas was a courageous missionary in the early Church, a companion of the apostle Paul, and a faithful servant of Jesus Christ. Silas accompanied Paul on his missionary journeys to the Gentiles and converted many to Christianity. He may also have served as a scribe and delivered Peter's first letter to the Churches in Asia Minor. Cf. *Acts* 16: 19-29, 17: 4-7, 10-15; 18: 5; 2 *Cor.* 1: 19. The Judas mentioned here could be Judas Barsabbas, a prophet and one of the leading men in the early Christian community in Jerusalem. Cf. Richard R. Losch, *All the People in the Bible: An A-Z Guide to the Saints, Scoundrels, and Other Characters in Scripture*. Cambridge 2008, 243-244.



“leaders among the brothers” as official delegates of the Church and sent them, along with Paul and Barnabas, to Antioch, with the following written synodal letter:

The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the believers of Gentile origin in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. Since we have heard that certain persons who have gone out from us, though with no instructions from us, have said things to disturb you and have unsettled your minds, we have decided unanimously to choose representativesⁱ and send them to you, along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials, that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled^j and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.

From the introduction of this synodal letter, it is evident that the senders of the letter are “both the apostles and the elders”, the leaders of the Jerusalem Church, and the recipients are “the believers of Gentile origin in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia”, that is, not only the Christians of gentile origin in Antioch, but also the Church scattered in the provinces of Syria and Cilicia. The middle part of the letter highlights how the two delegates were chosen: “we have decided unanimously to choose representatives and send them to you”, and they were officially authorized by the authorities in Jerusalem to publish and carry out the decision of the synod. At the end of the letter, the synodal decision is reproduced, as it was exactly decided at the synod: “to impose on you no further burden than these essentials”. Then the four “essentials” decided by the synod are enumerated, thus excluding all others, especially the Mosaic law and circumcision, the main subjects of controversy.

The decree, which repeats exactly what was established at the synod, is presented in a very solemn form as the joint work of the Holy Spirit and the apostles: “it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” and consequently it should be obediently accepted by all.¹⁸ The decision is made and communicated exclusively by the “apostles and the elders”, and

18. Cf. G. Leonardi, “É ancora attuale il concilio di Gerusalemme?”, 76; G. Schneider, *Commento teologico del nuovo testamento*, 243-247; F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 313-316; *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 9, 205-207.

it is to them that the important phrase is to be referred: "It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us". The role of the whole community was limited to the preparatory meetings and discussions, which were about their information and initial assessment. But the decision itself, made in the presence of the Holy Spirit, as well as its announcement and promulgation were the responsibility and right of the "apostles and elders".¹⁹

As we have already seen, the synodal letter mentions an invisible member of the synod, namely the Holy Spirit. The synods and the canons are qualified, especially in the East, by the adjectives holy and sacred respectively, because all real synodal activity is the joint effort of the bishops and the Holy Spirit, who is the source of all holiness. If anarchism, individualism, libertinism, megalomania, secularism, sectarianism, excessive provincialism and selfish prejudices are not burned in the fire of the Holy Spirit, with due submission to His promptings, in view of the common good, the synod may prove unholy, and consequently, the decisions of such synods cannot be called "sacred". A synod without the Holy Spirit may be characterized by some of the "works of the flesh" such as enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrelling, discord, divisions, envy, and carousing (cf. *Gal.* 5: 20-21). In contrast, a synod guided and enlightened by the Holy Spirit can produce fruits of the Spirit such as "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (cf. *Gal* 5: 22-23), as well as unity, harmony, and fellowship.

The apostles and elders who participated in the synod were of Jewish origin. If they had decided according to the "flesh", that is, according to human criteria, the decision would most likely have been in favour of the Judaeo-Christian groups and would have mandated adherence to the Mosaic law. On the contrary, renouncing human wisdom and ethnic preference, they recognised, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the universal salvific will of God and, in accordance with the teachings of Christ (cf. *Mt.* 28: 18-19; *Mk.* 16: 15-16; *Lk.* 24: 47; *Acts* 1: 8) and the promptings of the

19. Cf. J. D. Zizioulas, "The Development of Conciliar Structures", 37; J. A. Fischer, "Die ersten Synoden", in W. Brandmüller, *Synodale Strukturen der Kirche*, Donauwörth 1977, 31.



Spirit, made a right decision that corresponded to the inscrutable plan of salvation and accompanying providence of God.

Peaceful Reception of the Synodal Decision by the Church (Acts 15: 30-34)

As we have already seen, after the synod was concluded, Barnabas and Silas were chosen by the apostles and elders “with the consent of the whole church” (Acts 15: 22) to carry the synodal letter to Antioch and officially transmit the decisions of the synod. The expression “with the consent of the whole church” indicates that the synodal decision was accepted and adopted by the entire assembly in Jerusalem.²⁰ As decided, Judas and Silas, together with Paul and Barnabas, went to Antioch, where the problem had originated, and delivered the synodal letter to the Church. Luke describes this important event as follows:

So they were sent off and went down to Antioch. When they gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. When its members read it, they rejoiced at the exhortation. Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the believers. After they had been there for some time, they were sent off in peace by the believers to those who had sent them.

Luke highlights the reaction of the community when the synodal letter was delivered: “When its members read it, they rejoiced at the exhortation”, meaning that they received the synod’s decision with joy and comfort. The two delegates, with their charisms, also exhorted the brothers with many words and strengthened them in the faith. Since the synod had made a final decision, all subsequent discussions and exhortations concerned only the ways and means of implementing the synod’s decision. Anyway, the problem was finally solved and after some time the two delegates returned to Jerusalem.

Both before and in the synod of Jerusalem, there were heated debates and discussions on the question of whether converts of gentile origin should be circumcised and be required to keep the Mosaic law before being received into Christianity by the baptism of “water and Spirit”. With the

20. Cf. International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 21.

authoritative decision of the synod of Jerusalem, the problem was solved forever and it was wholeheartedly accepted by both opposing groups, namely the Jewish Christians and the gentile believers, and thus peace, harmony, and unity began to prevail in the early Church. This is the way of synodality for all peoples and all times. Once a final decision has been made by a synod, the true disciples and believers of Christ always receive it with joy, comfort and a spirit of obedience.

The validity of the decisions of a synod does not depend on their reception by Christian communities, although the decisions become effective only if they are accepted and implemented by at least a large majority of those concerned. The conciliar history of the Church shows that the question of observance of the Mosaic law has not been discussed again at any of the synods or councils. Even if some Jewish Christians had not accepted the apostolic decision, it would have remained valid. In this case, however, both groups joyfully and willingly accepted the decision, strengthening the unity and fellowship of the early Church.

This important apostolic decision, which always remains valid, also paved the way for the universalization of Christianity and the rapid spread of the Christian faith throughout the world, embracing all who accepted the good news and believed in Jesus Christ, regardless of nations, cultures, religions, ethnic groups and castes. The then Congregation (now Dicastery) for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments rightly affirms:

Faith in Christ offers to all nations the possibility of being beneficiaries of the promise and of sharing in the heritage of the people of the covenant (cf. *Eph.* 3: 6), without renouncing their culture. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, following the example of Saint Peter (cf. *Acts* 10), Saint Paul opened the doors of the Church not keeping the Gospel within the restrictions of the Mosaic law, but keeping what he had received of the tradition which came from the Lord (cf. *1 Cor.* 11: 23). Thus from the beginning, the Church did not demand of converts who were uncircumcised "anything beyond what was necessary" according to the decision of the apostolic assembly of Jerusalem (cf. *Acts* 15: 28).²¹

21. Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, *The Roman Liturgy and Inculturation*, IV Instruction for the Right Application of the Conciliar Constitution on the Liturgy (nn. 37-40), Rome 1994, no. 14.



The Decision of the Synod of Jerusalem as an Essential Element of St Paul's Teaching

In the *Letter to the Romans*, Paul has a long discussion about circumcision and keeping the Mosaic law and concludes that all who believe, whether Jews or Gentiles, are saved by faith in Jesus Christ (*Rom.* 2: 17-4, 25). He teaches that a person is not justified by the works of the (Jewish) law, but by faith in Jesus Christ; no one is justified by the works of the law (*Gal.* 2: 15-17). In the *Letter to the Ephesians*, Paul describes in a wonderful way how Jesus Christ brought both groups, Jews and Gentiles, together through his blood, broke through the dividing wall and abolished the Mosaic law:

So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision”—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands—remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God (*Eph.* 2: 14-22).

Paul goes on to state that by the mystery of Christ “the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (*Eph.* 3: 6) and according to the gift of God’s grace Paul became a servant “to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ (cf. *Eph.* 3: 7-9). Paul proclaims: “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (*Eph.* 4: 4-5). In summary, the decision of the

synod of Jerusalem had a great impact on Paul's teaching and mission, and still today ensures the unity and equality of all believers in Christ, despite national, ethnic, racial and socio-cultural differences.

The Synod of Jerusalem as the Paradigm of Synodality

Although the terms synod and council did not exist at that time, all the constitutive elements of a true synod can be seen in the Jerusalem assembly: preliminary discussions with the people of God, synodal assembly of apostles and elders, discussion and decision on the question of the observance of the Mosaic law by gentile Christians, proclamation of the decision to the people of God in Jerusalem and its acceptance, and official synodal letter communicating the decision to the other local Churches and its reception. All synodal activities, especially in the Eastern Churches, are based on the example of the first synod of the apostles in Jerusalem and have developed in this perspective. Therefore, this ecclesial tradition presents itself as the continuation and extension of the apostolic tradition.²² Thus synodality as the organizational and governing form of the Church, is based on the teaching of Christ and on the apostolic praxis that represents the authentic interpretation of that teaching and its application in the first Christian community.

According to the Orthodox theologian Liviu Stan, the Jerusalem assembly is the first example of the application of the synodal principle and the synodal form of organization and governance of the Church. This indeed represents an authentic interpretation of the Lord's teaching on the governance of the Church, beyond all discussions and doubts, as an authentic ministry, through a common consensus or understanding of all, namely the synodal form, and not through the domination, imposition

22. Cf. J. Hajjar, "The Synod in the Eastern Church", in *Concilium* 8 (1965) 30; L. Stan, "Sinodalità" (trad. italiana da rumeno, da Mirca Client), in *Oriente Cristiano* 2 (1970) 87-88; C. J. Hefele, also traces the origin of the synods back to the synod of Apostles, cf. *Histoire des conciles* Tome I (première partie), Paris 1907, 2 and 125-126; J. A. Fischer, "Die ersten Synoden", 27-33; J. A. Fischer, "Das sogenannte Apostelkonzil", in G. Schwaiger (ed.), *Konzil und Papst: Historische Beiträge zur Frage der höchsten Gewalt in der Kirche*, München-Paderborn-Wien 1975, 1-15; H. Jedin, *Ecumenical Councils of the Catholic Church*, New York 1960, 13; W. Beinert, "Konziliarität der Kirche", in *Catholica* 33 (1979) 97-98; D. Savramis, "Das Apostelkollegium—Das soziologische Motive seines Ursprungs", in *Konziliarität und Kollegialität*, Innsbruck-Wien-München 1975, 70-86, 88-89.



or command of one or some over others. For this reason, the Jerusalem assembly constitutes the first norm or imperative to practise the synodal form of church organization and governance.²³

Jean-Marie Roger Tillard highlights: "The meeting in Jerusalem, considered by itself, is without any doubt the most revealing scriptural episode of apostolic planning and of what we today call the "collegial" quality of major decisions [...]. When it is a question of the identity of the Christian community, of what touches the roots of the faith, no one is free to make decisions about these things as he pleases; it must be done with recourse to the unanimity of the apostolic witness [...]."²⁴ The International Theological Commission confirms: "By all listening to the Holy Spirit through the witness given of God's action and by each giving his own judgment, initially divergent opinions move towards the consensus and unanimity (ὁμοθυμαδόν: cf. 15, 25) that are the fruit of communal discernment that serve the evangelising mission of the Church".²⁵

Indeed, from the example of the synod of Jerusalem it is clear that the solution of problems on the basis of common consensus and mutual agreement is the most acceptable way of proceeding, because it expresses the profound communion and collegiality of the bishops who, through the action of the Holy Spirit, share in one and the same supreme priesthood of Christ. Consensus, however, cannot be brought about by cheap compromises that contradict Sacred Scripture, apostolic tradition, patristic teaching, the official Magisterium, as well as authentic liturgical and canonical traditions. The conciliar history of the Church in East and West demonstrates that when consensus cannot be reached, decisions can be made on the basis of majority or qualified majority votes, and that these will also be equally valid.

The Lucan narrative of the Jerusalem synod also provides an exemplary description of problem solving in the Jerusalem Church and an excellent model for collegial action. It also provides a model for the interaction of the Church in its various actualizations: the central mother Church in Jeru-

23. Cf. L. Stan, "Sinodalità", 87-88.

24. J. M. R. Tillard, *Church of Churches: The Ecclesiology of Communion*, 199.

25. International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 21.

saalem and the local Church in Antioch.²⁶ Although Paul was an apostle of Jesus Christ, from whom he received his commission and ministry to evangelize the Gentiles (cf. *Acts* 9: 15; 22: 21, 26: 16-17; 1 *Cor.* 15: 19; 2 *Cor.* 11: 5, 38; *Gal.* 1: 12, 16), he did not arbitrarily decide to solve the problem about the observance of Mosaic law, but went to Jerusalem to consult the other apostles and elders and to obtain an authentic collegial decision that was valid for the entire Church. This is still the most appropriate method today to regulate the relations between the central mother Church and the local Churches, especially to solve problems of evangelization and pastoral care.

In the synod of Jerusalem, Peter had a special position as head of the apostolic college, but he did not impose his will or make the decision alone; the apostles, the elders and the brethren all had their part to play.²⁷ On Peter's attitude at the Synod of Jerusalem, Jean-Marie Roger Tillard writes: "Peter intervenes, his voice carries weight (*Acts* 15: 7, 12, 14). He tries to bring about unanimity (*homothynadon*, 15, 23). But he does not impose his will and he does not take the decision alone; James, 'the apostles, the elders and the brethren' (15, 23) each had their part to play. James had a particularly large part. Peter does not have to create unity – that comes from the Spirit of the Lord – but to keep the community in *koinonia* [...]"²⁸ First among the apostles, Peter provided strong and persuasive leadership and direction by expressing his authoritative opinion on the observance of the Mosaic law, but Paul, Barnabas, and James were also free to express their opinions so that a unanimous collegial decision could be made for the common good of the Church that is still valid today. Freedom of thought and expression, without intimidation and threats of negative consequences, is essential for authentic synodal functioning at every level of the Church.

Conclusion

The *Acts of the Apostles* is a common biblical heritage of all Christianity, embodied in various forms: universal Catholic Church, Latin Church,

26. R. Kress, "The Church as Communio: Trinity and Incarnation as the Foundation of Ecclesiology", in *The Jurist* 36 (1976) 145.

27. Cf. R. E. Brown, K. P. Donfried and J. Reumen, *Peter in the New Testament*, London 1974, 49-56.

28. J. M. R. Tillard, *The Bishop of Rome*, London 1983, 125.



Orthodox Churches, Eastern Catholic Churches, and ecclesial communities that emerged from the Protestant Reformation. Therefore, the principle of synodality enshrined in the *Acts of the Apostles* also applies to all Churches and ecclesial communities. According to the consciousness of the early Church and to the apostolic tradition, “assemblies” or synods were the means of resolving doctrinal and disciplinary disputes that arose in Christian communities and of maintaining the unity and harmony of the Church on the basis of consensus and concord. Important decisions about the expansion of the Church in the apostolic period were made by the assembly of “apostles and elders”. Even though the assembly in Jerusalem was not a synod in the strict modern juridical sense, it was a clear indication of the collegial life of the Church already in the apostolic period and a precursor of all conciliar activities in the Church.

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